MARY SHELLEY’S FRANKENSTEIN

Image created by Christian Birkett, Bachelor of Applied Science in Digital Media, from Stuart, Florida.
The librarians have put together many resources you can use with your classes or to prepare you to talk about *Frankenstein* with or without having read the book. We have copies of *Frankenstein* in print, eBook format, audiobook (on CD), and streaming audio (download to an MP3 device or your smartphone). We also have many film adaptations in streaming video and DVD format. You can access our growing list of resources and see dates for our events on the LibGuide here: [www.irsc.libguides.com/onebook](http://www.irsc.libguides.com/onebook)

**About the *Frankenstein* Movie with Robert DeNiro:**

“This 1994 film adaptation starring Kenneth Branagh and Robert De Niro arguably adheres more closely to the original novel than any other film—so much so that Shelley’s name is included in the title. The critics weren’t so convinced: Numerous reviews suggested that Branagh had bitten off more than he could chew. The most serious deviation from the novel occurs when the monster kills Frankenstein’s bride Elizabeth, and then, grief-stricken, attaches her head to his mate Justine’s body and brings her back to life. The reanimated Elizabeth is horrified to see she is a monster, too, and subsequently kills herself.”

**Background**

The 1931 film *Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale and starring Boris Karloff, introduced the world to the iconic figure of the Frankenstein monster. The green-faced creature with bolts in his neck, wearing a jacket and stumbling away from torch-bearing peasants, has little in common with the creature depicted in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, but he has superseded her creation in the popular imagination. Each year at Halloween, variations on Universal Studio's version of the creature show up. Fierce or cuddly, deadly or pathetic, they all draw on the emotional range of Boris Karloff's brilliant, speechless performance.

One reason the film version of the Frankenstein story is so different from Shelley's novel is that it was made in a mass media age, for audiences with little sense of the theological principles that Shelley was exploring. Though it bears the same title, the Universal Studio version of *Frankenstein* is not actually based on Shelley's novel. In the more than one hundred years that passed between the two, there were countless stage adaptations of the novel, each adding a few twists to the story. The film's script, by Francis Edward Faragoh and Garrett Fort, actually credits a 1927 British play by Peggy Webling, a version that included elements that had been added over time.

This movie and *Dracula*, released earlier the same year, established Universal as the premier studio for monster movies and began a franchise, with the sequels *Bride of Frankenstein, Son of Frankenstein, House of Frankenstein* and others. It also opened the door for other popular films featuring the Wolfman, the Mummy, the Invisible Man, and the Creature from the Black Lagoon. The film also made Karloff a household name; his portrayal of the monster established new standards for acting in the genre.

Victor Frankenstein - The main character who has gone away to school at Ingolstadt in Germany, his native country. He had lived in Geneva, Switzerland a French-speaking area of the country. The Monster - created by Victor Frankenstein out of the corpses of others and reanimated by electricity. Learns from watching a family of humans interact (the peasants) and desires a mate. Alphonse Frankenstein - Victor, Ernest, and William’s father. Elizabeth Lavenza - in the uncensored 1818 version she is Victor’s cousin. In the 1831 version of the novel she is the adopted daughter of Alphonse and Caroline. Justine Moritz - Victor’s cousin, wrongly accused of William’s murder and is executed before Victor can save her. William Frankenstein - Victor’s beautiful little brother who is killed by the monster when the child shows his fear of the monster despite the monster’s protestations of not wanting to hurt him. Ernest Frankenstein - Victor’s brother. Henry Clerval - Victor’s childhood friend who arrives at college after Frankenstein let his creation loose and fell into a fever. Clerval helps him through his illness. Beaufort - Caroline’s father and Alphonse’s friend, he was a merchant who lost all his wealth and died shortly later. Caroline Beaufort - Alphonse’s wife and Victor, Ernest, and William’s mother. Robert Walton - Arctic sailor whose letters tell the tale of Frankenstein’s creation as he rescues Victor and relates the story to his sister, Mrs. Saville. Peasant Family - includes a blind man named De Lacey; his son and daughter, Felix and Agatha; and a woman, Safie. The monster observes their interactions to learn. He approaches the blind man because he knows the others will reject him for his hideousness, but he soon shows himself to the others and is rejected as monstrous. M. Waldman - Victor’s chemistry professor. Victor is impressed by him. M. Krempe - Victor’s professor of natural philosophy. Victor despises him.

Overview of the Novel

Published in 1818, Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus (1818) by Mary Shelley (1797-1851) is one of the most influential and popular novels in the English language. Critical interest in the text, which greatly increased in the twentieth century, has largely focused on its ethical, moral, and social implications.

Frankenstein is structured as a series of frame narratives (a story within a story). It begins with the letters of Captain Walton to his sister. Walton describes his encounter with Doctor Frankenstein, whose sled has become stranded on an Arctic ice floe. The novel then adopts Frankenstein's perspective as he recounts his childhood in Geneva, Switzerland. After his mother’s death, Frankenstein leaves home to study in Germany. There he becomes fixated on creating a synthetic man from the body parts of corpses imbued with the spark of life. When his creature comes to life, Frankenstein is repulsed by it and flees; he later returns to find the creature gone. After his younger brother is murdered, Frankenstein travels home to Geneva and notices the creature lurking near the murder scene. Convinced of the creature’s guilt, he is
horrified to learn that the murder has been blamed on the family's maid, who is subsequently executed.

Wracked with guilt, Frankenstein wanders the countryside. He is accosted atop a glacier by the creature, who confesses to the crime and pleads for understanding. The creature traces the events since his escape from Frankenstein. Having spent months observing a family, he has taught himself to speak and read. He has come to realize the value of companionship, but his appearance thwarts his attempts to make friends.

The creature begs Frankenstein to make him a mate, and the doctor reluctantly agrees, only to have a change of heart just before completing his task. The creature becomes enraged and threatens the doctor. Frankenstein returns to Geneva and marries, but the creature attacks and kills the bride. Frankenstein pledges to track down and destroy his creation and follows him to the Arctic.

The narrative ends with Walton's letters, which relate that Frankenstein, already weakened from cold when found by Walton, has deteriorated and died. After Frankenstein's demise, Walton discovers the creature in the room where Frankenstein lies in state. The creature tells Walton of his loneliness and remorse and leaves the ship intent on dying.

The novel's subtitle alludes to its key theme: the danger of seeking forbidden knowledge. Like the Greek mythological character Prometheus, who steals fire from the gods, Frankenstein assumes godlike powers when he fabricates life. Additionally, the book calls into question what it means to be a "monster," demonstrating Frankenstein's tendency toward destruction and the creature's capacity for compassion. The motif of the double is also prominent in the novel, with the monster's actions representing the doctor's own repressed desires.

*Frankenstein* garnered commercial success when published, but it was critically condemned as sensationalist. While the quality of the novel's prose has been maligned, its thematic elements have inspired a wealth of critical study. Scholars have explored the book's religious undertones, noting parallels between the Christian parable of the prodigal son and the predicament of the creature. Others have approached the text from a psychoanalytical standpoint, expounding on the creature's conflicting emotions toward his creator.


**Possible Topics**

**Legends**: How did legends contribute to the development of Frankenstein?

**LGBT**: Explore the development of Dr. Frankenstein’s creature. Did Dr. Frankenstein utilize human parts from one gender or multiple genders? How would this difference impact the story? Are you able to discern the creature’s gender?
**Mob Violence**: Mob violence occurs in Frankenstein. Why did this behavior manifest in the novel? What indicators were present that suggested that mob violence might occur? Compare a contemporary example of mob violence to Frankenstein.

**Mythology**: Compare Frankenstein to a Greek myth (e.g., Prometheus). Who was Prometheus and why is he important to the novel?

**Parental Relationship**: Is there a parental relationship in Frankenstein? How is it similar or different from your perspective of a parent's relationship with his/her child?

**Patriarchy**: Identify the patriarchal stereotypes prevalent in Frankenstein. How are women portrayed in the novel? What other instances of inequity are evident?

**Philosophy**: How do the works of Locke and Rousseau impact the novel?

**Politics**: Identify political undercurrents in Frankenstein. What were the political issues of Shelley’s time?

**Romantic Literature or Movement**: What are the basic characteristics of the Gothic Novel and Romantic literature/movement? Frankenstein crosses these two time periods. Into which time period do you believe the book best falls and why?

**Science as Power**: How do the scientific discoveries of this time period balance with the potential to cause harm?

**Sociology**: What is the cultural significance of Frankenstein?

**Symbols, Images, and Allegories**: Identify one of the aforementioned topics and explore its use through Frankenstein.

**Women**: Describe how Shelley portrays women in Frankenstein. What is the role of the woman in this novel?

**Abandonment**: Describe how Dr. Frankenstein’s creature exhibits signs of abandonment?

**Archetypes**: Identify and explore a plot or character archetype in Frankenstein.

**Bioethics**: Explore bioethics from two perspectives - 1) impact on science (within the lab) and 2) impact on society (post-lab).

**Body Image**: How does the treatment of Dr. Frankenstein’s creature compare to contemporary society’s rejection of people who do not fit the image of acceptable beauty/appearance?

**Contemporary Fiction**: Compare Frankenstein to a contemporary gothic work.
**Copyright:** The Frankenstein image captured by Universal is copyright protected. Which features are protected? How else might the creature be portrayed?

**Creations:** How does innovation like Dr. Frankenstein’s creature affect society?

**Doppelganger:** Explore how Frankenstein and the creature form a doppelganger (mirror) relationship.

**Geography:** Identify the geographic locations where scenes in the novel take place. Is there a contrast between the scene and the geographical backdrop?

**Gothic Novel:** Compare Frankenstein to a contemporary Gothic novel.

**Gothic Novel:** What are the basic characteristics of the Gothic Novel? How does Frankenstein fit these characteristics?

**History:** What is the historical significance of Frankenstein? What are the historical influences in the novel?

**Individual Reflections:** Dr. Frankenstein and his creature both take different paths within the story. Describe their individual reflections about humanity, individual rights, and advances in science. How are their observations similar or different?